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Violence in Pre-Famine Ireland: the Testimony of Irish Folklore and Fiction

The historian, the literary critic and the writer have been intrigued and perplexed by the early nineteenth-century Irish peasantry. Recent studies of agrarian violence suggest it was inextricably linked to the folklore and customs of the peasantry, but many aspects of this traditional culture, especially its attitudes about violence, remain relatively unexplored. Thomas Flanagan has pointed out that one of the major problems early nineteenth-century fiction writers faced was coming to terms with the archetypal countryman[1]—those whom James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus later referred to as "terrible queer creatures at the latter end of the world." Nevertheless, John and Michael Banim, William Carleton and Gerald Griffin do delineate several important facets of the peasantry's attitudes about violence. Although these writers were addressing a middle-class, mainly English, audience, the consistency of several aspects of their portrait of rural violence suggests that Thomas MacDonagh was correct, as he was in so many prophetic ways in his *Literature in Ireland*, in emphasising that the "Anglo-Irish literature that matters in the nineteenth century came from new English speakers whose fathers and grandfathers spoke only Irish" rather than viewing the Banims, Carleton and Griffin as propagandists addressing a non-peasant audience.[2] The folklore of rural Ireland, that which was collected during the nineteenth century and that which survived to be recorded in this century, also provides us with an invaluable insight into the mind of the peasantry. As Kevin Danaher remarked of the folklore concerning Daniel O'Connell: 'Wasn't it often, having read an historical account, that we wanted to find out what the opinions of the common people were about the people and the events that were much spoken of long ago?—It is possible to enter the minds of people who were there long ago through the medium of folklore."[3]

1. Thomas Flanagan, *The Irish Novelists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 339.
2. Thomas MacDonagh, *Literature in Ireland* (1916; rpt. London: Kennikat Press, 1970), p. 24.
3. Caoimhín Ó Danachair, "Donall Ó Connaill i mBéalaibh na nDaoine", *Studia Hibernica* 14 (1974), 40. Quotation transl. by James M. Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room: The Irish Historical Novel* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1983), p. 18.

My paper will summarise some of the conclusions of my research into attitudes about violence in pre-Famine Ireland as revealed in its folklore and fiction. I will use the terms "peasant" and "peasantry" because, although they regrettably have some negative connotations, no synonym such as "folk" or "countryman" works as well. I will not distinguish among the various levels in this peasant society as the historian of economic and social issues inevitably must do. For the most part, the oral traditions I will be considering permeated all the social and economic levels within the peasantry.

Some remarks about the worldview of the pre-Famine peasantry are necessary to an understanding of their attitudes about violence. In general, their outlook on life was conservative, passive, fatalistic and strongly influenced by beliefs in a supernatural which largely transcended the boundaries of orthodox Christianity. Irish fairylore, the most popular genre of folklore collected in the early nineteenth century, repeatedly reflects such an outlook.

The following fairy legend, collected many times during and since the early nineteenth century, is typical of hundreds of such legends:[4] A young peasant girl laughingly remarks to a pregnant frog, "I hope I am present when you give birth to your young." The frog was a fairy temporarily in animal form. That night a mysterious gentleman comes to take the girl underground to a fairy dwelling and promises that no harm will come to her. She witnesses the fairy give birth, the burning of the baby in the hearth, and the fairies rubbing the baby's ashes in their eyes. Before the girl returns to the human realm, the fairy woman gives her a shawl and a purse of gold coins; and, on her own and unbeknownst to the fairies, the girl rubs some of the ashes of the dead baby in her eye. When she obeys the fairy gentleman's orders to tie the shawl around a tree, the tree splits in half—her fate had she not obeyed. Likewise, after she follows his command to exchange the coins and not take any home, that very night every house which contained one of the coins burned down. Several weeks later she goes to a fair and discovers the eye she rubbed with ashes has the power to see the fairies when she sees the fairy gentleman who is invisible to everyone else. When she speaks to him, he is angry at her for having acquired such knowledge and he plucks out her eye. The girl in that legend lives

4. "The Fairy Frog" in *Folktales of Ireland*, ed. and transl. Sean O'Sullivan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 169–71, 271–72.

in a world at the mercy of supernatural forces beyond her comprehension: her every self-assertive action is punished, while humility and obedience are rewarded.

In a similar vein, the Irish folklorist Maire Mac Neill's conclusion that Irish folklore is not so much concerned with the lowly hero who makes good, but with the king's son who regains his ancestral rights reflects the conservatism at the heart of many traditional Irish narratives.[5] The folksongs and poetry of the Irish-speaking peasantry mirrored similar attitudes. The majority of poems in Seán O'Tuama and Thomas Kinsella's *An Duanaire: Poems of the Dispossessed 1600–1900* are elegiac and passive with little reference to violence. Indeed, the major theme of much early nineteenth Irish poetry was love.[6] Thomas MacDonagh argues that the best poetry of what he refers to as the "Irish Mode"—meaning true to the native tradition in both form and substance—is in the lyric form.[7]

Thomas Crofton Croker referred to the songs of the peasantry as "rebellious" in *Researches in the South of Ireland* (1824)[8], but their true nature was apparent to Lady Gregory and Thomas Davis who found them to be too passive.[9] Many of the most popular songs in Irish and English among the early nineteenth-century peasantry exemplify passivity, conservatism and fatalism. In "The Blackbird", an immensely popular Jacobite song, a young woman awaits the arrival of a Stuart saviour. In the "Shan Van Vocht" the speaker is passively awaiting the French. Once such a saviour arrived, the peasantry was only too ready to give him the blame for any defeat, as in the many oral legends about King James's cowardice at the Boyne. It's little wonder that one of the major emphases in Thomas Davis's nationalism had to be on self-reliance.

5. Maire MacNeill, "Irish Folklore as a Source for Research", *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 2, No. 3 (1965), 342.
6. Patrick C. Power, *The Story of Anglo-Irish Poetry 1800–1922* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967), p. 17.
7. T. MacDonagh, *Literature*, p. 83.
8. Thomas Crofton Croker, *Researches in the South of Ireland, Illustrative of the Scenery, Architectural Remains, and the Manners and Superstitions of the Peasantry* (London: J. Murray, 1824), p. 329; see also his *The Keen of the South of Ireland* (London: Percy Society, 1844), p. xviii.
9. Augusta Gregory, "The Felons of Our Land", *Cornhill Magazine*, 8, (1900), 622)34; Thomas Davis, "Essay on Irish Songs", in *The Songs of Ireland*, ed. Michael J. Barry (Dublin: Duffy, 1845), pp. 25–43.

In Thomas Lavelle's "The County of Mayo"—which was very popular in Irish since the seventeenth century and is best known in George Fox's translation in which the speaker is "sailing, sailing swiftly from the County of Mayo"—the mood is one of angry resignation but resignation nevertheless. Popular songs focused much more frequently on a sense of moral and cultural superiority, such as characterises the speaker in "The County of Mayo", than on violence. When violence is considered, it was a noble but futile attempt, as in the popular song, "Sean O'Dwyer of the Glen", or else a vision of apocalyptic violence safely in the future, as in "Róisín Dubh". Although "Róisín Dubh" is best known today in the English version which James Clarence Mangan wrote in the 1840's, it and "The Blackbird" originally were love songs.

The emphasis in popular songs, especially those commemorating the 1798 uprising such as "The Croppy Boy", is on the Irish peasant as the victim of violence rather than the perpetrator of it. The folklorist Patrick Kennedy, who was born in 1801, suggests that oral traditions concerning '98 in County Wexford served to deter rather than encourage future violence.[10] Many of the street ballads in Georges-Denis Zimmermann's *Songs of Irish Rebellion*, a collection of political street ballads and rebel songs from 1780—1900, portray the rebel as a victim of English violence and often of an Irish informer who falsely accused him, though the peasant about to be executed nobly refuses to betray his comrades in order to save his own life. Such moral heroism effectively erases any guilt the rebel might have incurred through violent crime, though the songs are usually ambiguous as to whether he had actually committed such crimes. Zimmermann describes the songs and the people themselves as intrinsically conservative: "Only when it was simply impossible to exist any longer would they resort to violence. Even then, it was usually an act of individual vengeance that was celebrated in their songs."[11] Thomas MacDonagh, despite his own revolutionary beliefs, reached a similar conclusion in his perceptive analysis of the

10. Patrick Kennedy, *Evenings in the Duffrey* (Dublin: M'Glashan & Gill, 1869), pp. 313—15. A similar perspective is apparent throughout his *The Banks of the Boro: A Chronicle of County Wexford* (1867) and *Legends of Mt. Leinster* (185).
11. Georges-Denis Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion: Political Street Ballads and Rebel Songs 1780—1900* (Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1967), p. 17.

native Irish tradition when he spoke of "the passivist, contemplative character of this people, so long enduring and so certain of the right—the good."[12]

The attitude of passive resignation which pervades much of the folklore of the pre-Famine peasant must be seen in conjunction with their confidence in their own moral superiority and their faith in supernatural forces at work in their world. The poems and songs of Anthony Raftery, the popular peasant poet of early nineteenth-century Galway and Mayo, present Irish history as a series of defeats, yet Raftery's remark that "God is stronger than the Cromwellians"[13] suggests the defeats were to be viewed from a somewhat transcendent perspective. As Oliver MacDonagh recently pointed out in *States of Mind, A Study of Anglo-Irish Conflict 1780—1980*, the characteristic Irish time-frame is a repetitive view of history which inclines Irishmen "perhaps in defensive wariness and from fear of failure—to prize the moral against the actual, and the bearing of witness as against success."[14] Roger McHugh's study of the Famine in oral tradition, which showed that the post-Famine peasantry saw even it as an act of God rather than in political terms as an act of mass murder on the part of the English,[15] suggests a passivity and a faith in larger powers which were probably even more intense earlier in the century.

The popularity of the curse as a means of redress and the prevalence of millenial expectations among the peasantry—and both the folklore and the fiction of the period are in agreement about the pervasiveness of serious and very violent cursing and of millenialism—illustrate a passivity, a fatalism, and a reliance on a supernatural dimension which extended well beyond Catholic priest and dogma. Carleton notes in "The Geography of an Irish Oath" that "the doctrine of fatalism is very prevalent among the lower orders.[16] Even Maria Edgeworth reflects the peasant view

12. T. MacDonagh, *Literature*, p. 19.
13. "The Story of Ireland to the Defeat at Aughrim as Little Bush told the Poet Raftery in Irish" in Lady Gregory, *The Kiltartan Books, comprising the Kiltartan Poetry, History and Wonder Books* (1909; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 94
14. Oliver MacDonagh, *States of Mind: A Study of Anglo-Irish Conflict 1780—1980* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 13.
15. Roger McHugh, "The Famine in Irish Oral Tradition", in *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History 1845—52*, ed. R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams (New York: Russell & Russell, 1976), pp. 391—436.
16. William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, 3rd ser. (London: Routledge, n.d.), p. 21.

of man at the mercy of forces larger than himself when Thady, the narrator of *Castle Rackrent*, remarks of Sir Murtagh: "He dug up a fairy-mount against my advice, and had no luck afterwards."[17] Carleton and the Banims continually represent the peasants' involvement with the supernatural as a major force in rural life. References to prophecies as an important factor in popular opinion abound in the Banims and Carleton and in such minor works as Mrs. S.C. Hall's *The Whiteboy* and Thomas Moore's *Memoirs of Captain Rock*. The rebel songs in Zimmermann's collection are filled with references to prophecies and motifs associating martyred rebels with Christ.

The popular legends in both Irish and English concerning the execution of Father Sheehy in 1766 typify many significant peasant attitudes about violence. According to oral tradition, Father Sheehy spoke against the inequity of tithes and the enclosure of common lands, and often collected money for the defense of suspected Whiteboys. His enemies claimed he participated in Whiteboy forays and, on the basis of false and conflicting testimony of a tortured half-wit named John Bridge, of a woman named Moll Dunlea who had once been publicly denounced by Sheehy and whose own mother testified against her, of a John Toohy who was serving a sentence for horse stealing, of a woman of the streets named Mary Butler, and a young tramp namer Lonergan, Father Sheehy was convicted of the murder of a man whom he supposedly killed when he refused to take the Whiteboy oath, though his body was never found. Father Sheehy was hanged, and his head exhibited over the jail gateway for twenty years. Here again are the motifs of the hero as victim of English violence, the moral heroism of the martyr and a decided ambiguity about his actual involvement in any violent crime. Moreover, the legends about Father Sheehy stress that all but one member of the jury that convicted him died violent deaths, and that after the trial all the jurors endured miserable lives plagued with excruciating maladies, madness and beggary. The perjurers Toohy and Lonergan died of loathsome diseases, Moll Dunlea broke her neck falling down the stairs of a public house cellar, and Bridge, the cornerstone of the government case

17. Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, in *Representative Irish Tales*, ed. W.B. Yeats (1891); rpt. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1979), pp. 41–42.

against Sheehy, disappeared and was presumed murdered by Whiteboys.[18]

Similarly, in the Limerick legends still current in this century about "Staker Wallace", an elderly farmer in 1798 who, "maddened" by "the cruel and outrageous conduct of the yeomen and soldiers", had joined the United Irishmen and was subsequently drawn and quartered, all the men who captured him, one of whom had a personal grudge against Wallace, met violent deaths, many at the hands of members of secret societies who were never caught though hundreds were arrested.[19] Larger supernatural forces were perceived at work in the punishment of Father Sheehy's and "Staker" Wallace's enemies, and any Whiteboy violence which was involved in bringing them to "justice" thus had supernatural sanction. Such attitudes about violence stop far short of the revolutionary violence which characterised much of the verse of the Young Ireland movement which became so popular in the years after the Famine that it has too often been equated with the popular mind throughout the century.

George Cornewall Lewis concluded in 1836 that general peasant involvement in Whiteboy violence was of a very limited nature: "Notwithstanding the numerous and powerful motives which we have described as inducing the Irish peasantry to join the Whiteboy combinations, yet when an occasion arises for an assertion of the terrors of this code, it seems the bulk of the peasantry are unwilling to be personally concerned, and that the system is chiefly propagated by intimidation."[20] Three studies which were published during the past year—Oliver MacDonagh's *States of Mind*, Michael Beames's *Peasants and Power: The Whiteboy Movements and their Control in pre-Famine Ireland*, and Charles Townshend's *Political Violence in Ireland*—agree with Lewis's assessment that early nineteenth-century agrarian violence was (1) essentially conservative in that it did not seek to overthrow the political order and create a new one and (2) actually represented a quite limited kind of violence in that it involve the threat of violence as much if not more than the fact of violence.

18. James Maher. *Romantic Slievenamon in History, Folklore and Song* (Mullinahone: n.p. 1954), pp. 95–100; Irish Folklore Commission ms. 407, p. 216.
19. "The 'Staker' Wallace", in Irish Folklore Commission ms. 1380, pp. 88–153.
20. George Cornewall Lewis, *On Local Disturbances in Ireland and on the Irish Church Question* (London: B. Fellowes, 1836), p. 193.

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Thomas Crofton Croker and other early nineteenth-century English and Anglo-Irish observers exaggerated the violence they saw and failed to distinguish between various kinds of violence. Recent studies of violence in nineteenth-century Ireland identify three kinds of violence: (1) spontaneous collective violence such as faction-fighting which has no explicit political intention although it could be related to land matters; (2) "reactive" or defensive rural violence as in agrarian movements such as the Whiteboys; and (3) "proactive"violence or organized, open insurrection.[21] The folklore and fiction of pre-famine Ireland also reflected those three specific kinds of violence and made even more minute distinctions among the kinds of violence which existed in rural Ireland.

Faction-fighting is the notorious instance of social violence within pre-Famine Ireland. Although many English and Anglo-Irish observers credited it with political and revolutionary implications and its full significance has yet to be studied, nineteenth-century fiction and the materials in the folklore archives at UCD suggest that faction-fighting was essentially an immensely popular and violent pastime. The peasants in Carleton's and Banim's fiction seem to enjoy fighting as much for the fun of it as for any conscious and specific reasons. This evidence supports Kevin Danaher's argument that "in reality faction-fighting was nothing more than a crude and rather dangerous form of sport . . . To the fighters themselves it was an expert game, a form of stick fencing" and "many customs and conventions were observed."[22] The observance of such customs and conventions and the fact that it took place on specific public occasions such as fairs, patterns and wakes indicate that it was controlled and limited. The Ulster folklorist E. Estyn Evans's discussion of the violence that occurred at fairs and other public gatherings as a traditional outlet for violence is significant because it suggests faction-fighting ultimately functioned as an escape valve for tensions and thus actually prevented less controlled kinds of violence.[23]

The Diary of Humphrey O'Sullivan, which records the rural life of Callan in County Kilkenny from 1827—1835 from the

21. Charles Townshend, *Political Violence in Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 10—50.
22. Kevin Danaher, *In Ireland Long Ago* (Cork: Mercier, 1962), pp. 148—652.
23. E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), pp. 253—266.

perspective of an Irish-speaking schoolteacher, provides an interesting perspective on faction-fighting. O'Sullivan clearly abhors faction-fighting, yet his diary makes clear it was an important social pastime and occurred only on specific social occasions. In one instance, although there was a great deal of talk about the violence between two factions that was to occur at an upcoming fair, no violence materialized. This suggests that the "talk" of violence should not necessarily be equated with the commission of violent deeds-an important lesson for anyone tempted to use the rhetorical violence often apparent in Irish songs and conversation as evidence of a wholehearted committment to violence. As Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh has pointed out, the politically allegorical aisling poetry with its violent rhetoric flourished in Munster in the late eighteenth century, yet that was the most peaceful province in 1798.[24] It should also be noted of faction fighting that there were not many actual deaths relative to the enormous number of peasants who participated in it.

Faction-fighting was also seen as a means of achieving justice. For example, in *The Collegians*, Gerald Griffin's fictional account of the most famous murder in nineteenth-century Ireland, that of Ellen Hanley, when the father of her fictional counterpart Eily O'Connor is asked whether he has sought justice by laying information before a magistrate concerning her disappearance he responds, "Lay informations? No—no sir. My back (faction) isn't so poor in the country that I need to do so mean a thing as that—I'll tell you the justice I want. To plant him overright me in the heart 'o Garryowen fair, or where else he'd like, an' give him a stick, an' let me pick justice out of his four bones."[25] It would obviously have taken only a short mental leap from such a view of illegal factions as a means of personal justice to an acceptance of illegal societies as instruments of social justice.

In the peasantry's own oral traditions, the violence committed by the English far outweighed that involved in faction-fighting in both quantity and quality. Cards under the topic of faction-fighting in the card catalogue of indexed materials in the Folklore Department at UCD extend for about six inches and demonstrate that the memory of faction-fighting was an important component

24. Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, "Gaelic Ireland, Popular Politics and Daniel O'Connell", *Galway Archaeological and Historical Society Journal* 35 (1975), p. 29.
25. Gerald Griffin, *The Collegians* (New York: Appleton, 1899), p. 69.

in the people's oral history—perhaps a necessary psychological antidote to images of a submissive, dispirited peasantry. Nevertheless, the number of oral traditions about Oliver Cromwell—the folk villain who incarnated the violent English presence in Ireland—are second only to those about Daniel O'Connell, the most popular figure in Irish oral tradition.[26]

Early nineteenth-century Irish fiction, although addressed primarily to an English audience, presents violence as endemic among English soldiers and Anglo-Irish gentry as among the peasantry. In *Memoirs of Captain Rock* (1824), Thomas Moore's Whiteboy persona argues repeatedly that English violence in Ireland was the main cause behind rural violence and echoes many oral traditions in collections and archives which make the same point.

Michael Banim's novel, *Crohoore of the Bill-Hook* (1825), the most important fictional account of rural violence in nineteenth-century Ireland, juxtaposes several kinds of rural violence: that done by English soldiers; that done by Rhia Doran, the illegitimate son of a profligate gentleman farmer; that done by the Whiteboys; and the violent murder supposedly committed by the peasant Crohoore. The novel implicitly suggests that the violence committed by the peasantry is much less reprehensible than the other kinds. The peasantry and the reader believe until the end of the novel that Crohoore brutally murdered his patron, Anthony Dooling, and his wife, and abducted their daughter Ally. However, the murder and abduction were actually committed by Rhia Doran, and Crohoore had abducted Ally from Doran in order to protect her. Doran convinces a reluctant Pierce Shea, Ally's betrothed, to join the Whiteboy band of which Doran is "Captain" because "the boys" supposedly know Ally's whereabouts and will help Pierce rescue Ally. To show his faith, Pierce must take the Whiteboy oath and participate in a midnight foray to cut off the ears of the tithe proctor, Peery Clancy. The local peasantry clearly support, though only at second hand and only in a verbal manner, the violence about to take place:

> as they clattered along, door after door was stealthily opened, half-dressed figures, male and female, appeared at each, and the oft-repeated salutation of "Dieu liuve a-voucheleen" (God speed you, lads), uttered in that bitter and gurgling tone in which they would have set mastiffs on a detested enemy, told that the mission of the riders was

26. Cahalan, p. 25.

> understood and appreciated . . . . the inmates of the hovels, at their doors, or lying on their straw, joined the uproar, and even the shrill scream of women, and the tiny pipes of children, could be distinguished; there was no pity for Peery Clancy.[27]

Yet only one person, referred to as "the finisher of the law", actually commits the violent deed, a mutilation which stops far short of death for a man who has caused the death of several people, and which thus represents a kind of justice. Later that night when Pierce Shea returns and rescues the tithe proctor from Delany, the victim of a cruel eviction who was left to guard him and plans to kill him, the tithe proctor turns around and gives his rescuer over to the soldiers for money. The next day when the soldiers are marching Pierce and Delany to Kilkenny, they meet a group of peasants pretending to be a funeral procession who suddenly disarm the soldiers and rescue Pierce and Delany without having to kill or injure a single dragoon. The sergeant convinces the people to give the soldiers back their guns so the soldiers will be spared the brutal punishments they would incur if they returned to the barracks without their weapons. He promises not to use the guns, but as soon as the weapons are returned he orders the soldiers to shoot. More than thirty peasants are killed and a dozen wounded. Thus, the most reprehensible violence in this most violent of all nineteenth-century novels is committed by the treacherous English soldiery and a profligate gentleman farmer whose life emulates that of the dissolute gentry. The peasant Crohoore, rather than being a violent murderer, had actually only prevented violence to Ally. The Whiteboys may be under the influence of the evil Doran, but the causes behind their primitive alternative to English "justice" are forcefully presented.

Indeed, when one examines the fictional portraits of rural violence in pre-Famine Ireland, the instances of murder for personal reasons far outnumber the murders which occur for agrarian reasons. Agrarian secret societies flourish in the background, but personal passions usually prove to be the cause of the seeming agrarian crimes. Even if Crohoore had murdered the Doolings it would have been for personal revenge against Anthony Dooling's mockery of him. Delany's intention to kill

27. Michael Banim, *Crohoore of the Bill-Hook*, in *Tales by the O'Hara Family* (1825; rpt. New York: Garland, 1979), I, pp. 212–218.

Peery Clancy was rooted in an intense personal vengeance rather than a commitment to abstract principles of justice. Just as Doran used Whiteboyism as a tool of his personal passions in *Crohoore*, Michael Banim's *The Croppy* (1828) portrayed Sir William Ludkin, a fictional Croppy leader in Wexford in 1798, as using the Croppies to advance his own murderous private purposes.

William Carleton's fiction also emphasises how the secret societies generated by peasant frustration at real agrarian injustices could become the tools of evil men seeking personal ends. The burning of the tithe-proctor Purcel's house, in which he and his son die, dominates the plot of Carleton's novel, *The Tithe Proctor* (1849), in which all three Whiteboy leaders possess motives which transcend agrarian ones. A jealous passion for the tithe-proctor's daughter governs the actions of Mogue and Buck English. According to Carleton, Buck English, whom he claims is a real person, "had been respectably reared, but gave himself up to the intoxicating excitement of the French Revolution" and "fought in '98" and subsequently "became the leader of all the lawless and disaffected parties—in County Limerick, and, indeed, in all Munster."[28] Such origins clearly distance him from the mass of Whiteboys he leads. Any United Irish political ends he might once have served are now subordinated to personal passion. Carleton, the Banims and other novelists who portrayed the political violence of 1798, such as Matthew Archdeacon in *Legends of Connaught* (1829) and *Connaught: A Tale of 1798* (1830), are all in agreement that a great gap existed between the mind of the peasantry and the political ideals of their United Irish leaders.

Buck English's brother, the enigmatic peddlar, Cannie Soogah, is also a Whiteboy leader, but only so he can forewarn the intended Whiteboy victims. Two villains and a heroic peddlar thus control agrarian violence for their own purposes. The violent murder at the basis of the plot of Carleton's *The Black Prophet* (1847) is also a crime of personal passion. The burning of a haggard by Whiteboys in Carleton's *Fardarougha, the Miser* (1839) is engineered by Bartle Flanagan, the Whiteboy "Captain", as a means of falsely incriminating his rival in love. A diabolic villain in the Gothic tradition leads the Ribbon attack in Carleton's most famous depiction of agrarian violence, "Wildgoose Lodge", which he claimed result from the Lynches of Wildgoose

28. William Carleton, *The Tithe Proctor* (London: Simms and M'Intyre, 1849), p. xii.

Lodge having refused to support the local Ribbonmen.[29]

The fiction and folklore also suggest that Whiteboyism was similar to faction-fighting in being something of a rural pastime. Phelim O'Toole in Carleton's tale, "Phelim O'Toole's Courtship", is the son of a comfortable farmer and involved with the local Whiteboys more for adventure than because of principle. Sir William Wilde claimed the Whiteboyism he witnessed in Counties Mayo and Roscommon in 1823 and 1825 "was really a sort of melo-dramatic exhibition" modelled on the older customs of Wrenboys, Mayboys and mummers, which also had a largely youthful membership, and was characterised by a spirit of "frolic—of rude enterprise and adventure in meeting." According to Wilde, socialisation far outweighed any ideological principles, except for the sense that "it was right to do something for O'Connell and the Emancipation, was firmly impressed on all." Wilde declares the Whiteboys committed only "petty outrages" until the Peelers were brought on the scene to eliminate them.[30]

Carleton and the Banims had a rather cynical attitude toward "peasant" movements so it suited them to describe the Whiteboys and other agrarian terrorists as easily led fools susceptible to evil leaders. Yet, although they generally depict the peasantry who participated in rural violence being manipulated by the personal or political passions of men whose class and ideology inevitably separated them from the peasantry's more practical concerns, these novelists invariably depict violence as having the tacit and verbal approval of the people. As noted earlier, the villagers cheer the Whiteboys as they slash off the tithe-proctor's ears in *Crohoore*. In Carleton's "The Hedge School", just before the hedgeschool master Mat Kavanagh, the local Whiteboy leader, is to be hanged, he begs the people to give up Whiteboyism. His speech is met with "a volley of execrations and curses" and he's accused of being "a traitor to the true cause."[31] Carleton concludes "Wildgoose Lodge" with an observation on the people's response to seeing the gibbeted body of the Ribbon

29. Studies of the oral traditions concerning the burning of Wildgoose Lodge indicate the peasantry considered the Ribbon leader a heroic martyr whose actual motive was having been rejected by Lynch's daughter. T.G.F. Paterson, "The Burning of Wildgoose Lodge", *County Louth Archaeological Journal* 12 (1950), p. 21; Daniel J. Casey, "Wildgoose Lodge: The Evidence and the Lore", *County Louth Archaeological and Historical Journal* 18; 19 (1974; 1975), pp. 140–64; 211–231.

30. Sir William Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions* (Dublin: McGlashan, 1853), pp. 79–84.

leader, Paddy Devaun: "The peasantry, too, frequently exclaimed, on seeing him, 'Poor Paddy!', a gloomy fact that speaks volumes."[32] Yet because only relatively few people gave more than a verbal commitment to agrarian violence, it represented a very limited commitment to violence.

Oral traditions concerning agrarian violence and secret societies which have survived also suggest approbation and ambiguity concerning violence. Legends refer to secret societies having accepted only people who met certain standards; the violence recounted is usually in response to obvious injustices; some highwaymen pretended to be Whiteboys; some crimes were attributed to Whiteboys which actually weren't their doing; the Whiteboy violence is frequently of a lesser degree than that committed by the authorities because it involved maiming rather than death; trickery is a more common Whiteboy method than violence, and even their violence involved more threat and intimidation than bloodshed, according to oral tradition.[33] Many legends depict Whiteboys as performing a legal function in settling feuds not necessarily involving land.[34] The many legends which recount a Whiteboy's capture and death, usually involving treachery on the part of authorities and informers, manage to at once applaud and condemn their violence: the perpetrators of agrarian violence expiate any guilt through their deaths and the treachery of the authorities only underscores the moral heroism of the Whiteboy, who like his counterpart in the rebel songs of '98, refuses to betray his comrades.

Oral tradition is not kind to the memory of Whiteboys who let ignoble motives interfere with their duties. For example, a County Kerry legend in existence more than one hundred years after the 1829 murder of a Protestant clergyman it recounts, claims he was murdered by two Whiteboys, one from Cork, another from Tipperary. According to the legend, the motives included robbery because one of the men, who kept the parson's watch which had his name engraved on it, was caught and hanged. The narrator says of him: "Perhaps it was his shot killed

31. Carleton, *Traits and Stories*, 2nd ser., p. 51.
32. Carleton, *Traits and Stories*, 3rd ser., p. 184.
33. Irish Folklore Commission ms. 1234, p. 321; for representative examples of these motifs, see IFC ms. 1213, pp. 483–516; IFC ms. 782, pp. 74, 82, 402ff.; IFC ms. 485, pp. 202–17.
34. Kennedy, *Evenings on the Duffrey*, 307–11, *Legends of Mount Leinster*, 116–19.

Tisdall, as the other man was never got."[35]

The materials in the archives of the Department of Irish Folklore archives at UCD concerning robbers outnumber the legends about faction-fighting and secret societies by about two to one. A large number of the robber legends concern villainous robbers who are outwitted by their victims. The majority of the robbers, however, are highwaymen of the Robin Hood type and have nationalistic associations because many of the original rapparees were supposed to have been Sarsfield's associates who stayed behind as outlaws rather than leave Ireland. Several motifs in these legends parallel motifs in the legends about agrarian secret societies: the romantic genteel leader; the image of a somewhat select membership; violence being committed during the administration of a system of justice outside of English law; the emphasis on cunning and trickery rather than physical force; and the death by treachery which ennobles the robber and atones for the guilt of any violent crimes he might have committed.[36] Such robber heroes were celebrated as much for their verbal violence and trickery as for any violent deeds. Several of the most famous such as Redmond O'Hanlon and Willie Brennan, were actually opposed to the shedding of blood.

Oral tradition suggests that the peasantry used language and cunning as their major defence against injustices. The verbal violence that abounds in the fiction of Carleton, the Banims and Griffin also indicates that language was a vicarious outlet for physical violence. In Griffin's *The Collegians* the peasant virago, Poll Naughten, addresses an English soldier "in a fierce tone":

> Let me in! do you want to thrust your scarlet between the tree and the rind? Let me in, you tall ramrod, or I'll pull the soap and powder out of your wig. If I had you on the mountains, I'd cut the pig's tail from your poll, and make a show o' you. Do, do—draw your Bay'net on me, you cowardly object. It's like the white blood o' the whole of ye! I

35. IFC ms. 796, p. 42.

36. For representative examples of these motifs, see IFC ms. 407, pp. 181–80; IFC ms. 404, pp. 337 ff.; J. Cosgrave, *A Genuine History of the Lives and Actions of the Most Notorious Irish Highwaymen, Tories and Rapparees*, 9th ed. (Belfast: n.p., 1776); *The Life and Adventures of James Freney, Together With An Account of the Actions of Several Other Noted Highwaymen* (Dublin: Warren, n.d.); John J. Marshall, *Irish Tories, Rapparees and Robbers* (Dungannon: n.p., 1927); Terence O'Hanlon, *The Highwayman in Irish History* (Dublin: Gill, 1932).

> know fifty lads of your size, that would think as little of tripping you up on a fair-green, and making a high-road of your powdered carcass, as I do of snapping my fingers in your face."[37]

In the same novel, Myles na Coppaleen cunningly uses honeyed language to beguile a group of the gentry. Carleton immortalised the peasant's ability to astound and confound the authorities with language in his "Essay on Irish Swearing" and in the unmatched heights of ambiguity he showed the peasantry achieving with language in "The Geography of an Irish Oath".

Any examination of peasant attitudes towards violence in pre-Famine Ireland must eventually consider the figure of Daniel O'Connell, the most popular figure in Irish oral tradition. His success as a leader and the oral legends celebrating him are certainly a major index to the popular mind. O'Connell survived in oral tradition mainly in legends about his being a cunning lawyer, "the Counsellor", rather than as a statesman or politician. Moreover, many popular songs suggested that O'Connell would use violence. In the case of O'Connell, clearly there is more at work than folk history's usual reduction of a leader to his most human dimensions. Nor was he remembered as a trickster lawyer simply because, as one recent commentator on the O'Connell legends would have it, he failed to achieve Repeal or deal with the Famine.[38]

Sean O'Faolain in *King of Beggars* said he yearned to know what the peasantry thought of O'Connell beyond their image of him as folk hero.[39] I suggest that the popular legends about O'Connell are an index of what the people actually thought about O'Connell and about violence because the popular image of O'Connell coincides so directly with what early nineteenth-century folklore and fiction suggests were fundamental peasant attitudes about violence.

Twentieth-century scholars are in general agreement with the nineteenth-century European view, voiced by Balzac, that O'Connell was the incarnation of his people. Studies by James

37. Griffin, p. 391.
38. Cahalan, p. 36. For a summary of the image of O'Connell in oral tradition, see Gearòid Ó Tuathaigh, "The Folk-hero and Tradition" in *The World of Daniel O'Connell*, ed. Donal McCartney (Dublin: Mercier, 1980), pp. 30)42.
39. Sean O'Faolain, *King of the Beggars: A Life of Daniel O'Connell* (1938; rpt. Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1980), p. 139.

Donnelly, Oliver MacDonagh and Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh have suggested that O'Connell's movement drew upon several aspects of Whiteboyism, especially its use of threatened violence and its millenialism.[40] Ó Tuathaigh claimed O'Connell also reflected the peasant mind in making his nationalist demands an exclusively Catholic cause. Yet Ó Tuathaigh dismissed the many traditional songs and legends associating O'Connell with violence as examples of the strength of poetic convention rather than seeing them as a true index of the popular mind and concluded that O'Connell differed in some fundamental ways from the traditional Gaelic mentality with regard to violence.[42] Such a view has been generally accepted because O'Connell himself was obviously so sincere in his disavowals of physical force.

To say that O'Connell incarnated the ambiguity and equivocation at the heart of peasant attitudes about violence seems closer to the truth. Oliver MacDonagh has recently argued that "in ambiguity as in so many other aspects of the emerging Catholic nation, O'Connell blazed the trail"[43] This seems to be especially true with regard to violence. The image of O'Connell as a cunning trickster, who often defended accused Whiteboys, predominates in the legends about him and thus implicity suggests that the threat of violence was his ultimate trick; popular songs about O'Connell explicitly associate him with violence again and again. Raftery's poems are especially noteworthy in this regard. Legends heroicised O'Connell for having killed D'Esterre. An ambiguity about violence is thus central to the popular conception of O'Connell. The associations of O'Connell with violence are too prevalent in oral tradition to be dismissed as a remnant of Jacobite literary conventions or as mere rhetoric. Despite his many sincere repudiations of violence, historians such as James Donnelly, Sam Clark and Galen Broeker, and folklorists who have studied the folklore about O'Connell, agree that considerable numbers among the peasantry did expect O'Connell to lead an armed revolt, and early nineteenth-century oral

40. James S. Donnelly Jr., "Pastorini and Captain Rock: Millenarianism and Sectarianism in the Rockite Movement of 1821–4", in *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest 1780–1914*, ed. S. Clark and J. Donnelly (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1983), pp. 102–139; O. MacDonagh, *States*, pp. 71–72; Ó Tuathaigh, "Gaelic Ireland", p. 33.
41. R. Dudley Edwards, *Daniel O'Connell and His World* (London, 1975), p. 88.
42. Ó Tuathaigh, "Gaelic Ireland", p. 33.
43. O. MacDonagh, *States*, p. 56.

traditions certainly support this view.[44]

O'Connell was associated in the popular mind with legendary heroes who had possessed a supernatural aura and sanction for the future violence they would be responsible for, in the case of the Jacobite heroes, or the limited violence they represented, in the case of the noble robbers. The legendary O'Connell shares many motifs with the Jacobite hero, as when he is depicted as the noble saviour coming from afar in the numerous legends of his celebrated ride from Derrynane to defend the Doneraile conspirators. Moreover, O'Connell's cunning use of language, his tricks and his distaste for bloodshed all parallel similar traits in the robber heroes. The association of O'Connell with Jacobite heroes and gentleman bandits extends even to minor motifs: Sarsfield, Bonnie Prince Charlie, many outlaw heroes and O'Connell all are said to have used the trick of turning their horses' shoes backwards to deceive their enemies.

Fiction writers, especially William Carleton, who once wrote a letter to Peel claiming he could prove a connection between O'Connell and agrarian violence, repeatedly insist on a connection between O'Connell and violence in the popular mind. In *The Tithe Proctor* Carleton's Cannie Soogah tells a gullible audience that the Whiteboy captain, Buck English is actually Daniel O'Connell's illegitimate brother.[45] The narrator in Carleton's "The Poor Scholar" remarks,

> It would be difficult, for example, to produce a more signal instance of energy, system, and perseverance than that exhibited in Ireland during the struggle for Emancipation. Was there not flattery to the dust? blarney to the eyes? heads broken? throats cut? houses burned? and cattle houghed? And why? Was it for the *mere pleasure* of blarney—of breaking heads (I won't dispute the last point though, because I scorn to give up the glory of the national character,)—of cutting throats—burning houses—or houghing cattle? No; but to secure Emancipation. In attaining that object was exemplified the Irish method of gaining a point.[46]

Carleton's Phelim O'Toole threatens his jailers with the words:

> Did yees ever hear of a man they call Dan O'Connell? Be my

44. Donnelly, p. 136; Galen Broeker, *Rural Disorder and Police Reform in Ireland, 1812–36* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 160–61.
45. Carleton, *Tithe Proctor*, p. 195.

> sowl, he'll make yees rub your heels together for keepin' an innocent boy in gaol—I tell yees, that if a hair o'my head's touched—ay, if I was hanged tomorrow—I'd lave *them* behind me that ud put a bullet, wid the help an' blessin' o' God, through anyone that'll injure me! So lay that to your conscience, an' do your best. Be the crass, O'Connell 'ill make you look nine ways at wanst for this! He's the boy can put the pin in your noses! He's the boy can make yees thrimble, one an' all o'yees—like a dog in a wet sack! An, wid the blessin' o' God, he'll help us to put our feet on your necks afore long![47]

In an early version of "The Hedge School", the two schoolboys who "keep the school in perpetual agitation" are named Dick O'Connell and Dan Shiel, thus interchanging the names of O'Connell and his associate Richard Shiel. The schoolmaster addresses these words to Dan Shiel during elocution lessons when the boy wants to recite a speech he wrote himself: "a purty figure you cut, wid a voice like a penny thrumpet, Dan!—You little spitfire, you; if you and your schoolfellow, Dick O'Connell, had been wid the Jews when they wanted to burn down the standin' corn of the Philistins, the devil a fox they might bother their heads about, for yees both would have carried firebrands by the hundher for them."[48]

The popular image of O'Connell and O'Connell's own techniques drew upon and articulated essential aspects of the peasantry's attitudes about violence: a sense of moral superiority had animated their popular songs and legends for decades; the supernatural motifs and prophecies associated with him gave him the supernatural aura and sanction of the traditional Irish hero; Whiteboyism had thrived on the successful technique of threatened violence; the trickster hero who defeats his stronger enemy through language and cunning had always been immensely popular in Irish oral tradition. Before O'Connell the majority of the peasantry had equivocated the choice between passive submission and violent protest; O'Connell transformed their ambiguity and equivocation into effective political action.

46. Carleton, *Traits and Stories*, 3rd ser., pp. 79—80.
47. Carleton, *Traits and Stories*, 4th ser., p. 219.
48. Carleton, *Traits and Stories*, 3nd ser., p. 42.